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NOTES

It's all a big surprise for smilin' Simon

Wednesday

The awarding of a special prize to **Paul Simon** couldn't have been more hastily arranged: Minutes before the singer-songwriter was due onstage, journalists were invited to go backstage at Place des Arts after the show. Few could oblige, because of deadline demands.

At about 11:30, Simon walked in and was greeted by jazz-fest honchos **Alain Simard** and **André Ménard**. On stage, before singing Slip Slidin' Away, he had thanked the artists who performed at Tuesday night's tribute to him, claiming he had found out about the event only after it took place. Backstage, he confirmed it to Simard and Ménard. "I was very touched by that," he said. "When I came through customs, they said, 'There was a big show all about you.'"

The three moved to the microphone, where Simon asked about the statue he was about to receive – the first Montreal Jazz Festival Spirit Award. "OK, so I'm not jazz, but I am spirit," he quipped. When told the statue was a sculpture based on a **Miles Davis** self-portrait, he turned serious, clearly impressed.

Before the official handover, Ménard told Simon that he considered his performance one of the best in the festival's 27 years. "It's extraordinarily pleasing to play in a beautiful concert hall, hear the sound, have my band hear it – and get a prize afterward," Simon said. "I will expect no less than that anyplace else, although there won't be any place that will equal Montreal – unless it's New York."

Simon also seemed thrilled to have received a CD recording of **Leonard Cohen**'s haunting recitation of The Sound of Silence, which was played at Tuesday's blowout. "Perhaps I'll put beats behind it and sell it on eBay – and split the profits with Leonard, of course."

BERNARD PERUSSE

"All the music we're playing tonight is by this Shubert of the tropics," clarinetist **Gabriele Mirabassi** said as he introduced Brazilian composer-guitarist **Guinga** at the Sucso Italia series premiere at Le Cabaret. The incredibly sensitive virtuoso Mirabassi is from Italy, while Guinga is one of Brazil's most revered composers. "As you might imagine, it's not every day we can meet and have coffee together. If there is a key word to describe this thing we're doing together, it's emotion. It's the biggest I've ever had in my life. And every time we play, this emotion comes back, always the same. So I'm very glad we can share this emotion with you."

Spellbinding is not the word for the evening's deep intimacy. Their body language told all: Mirabassi hitting the sweetest high notes and the most caressing soft ones while swooning and swaying to the melodies, the calm Guinga flicking off the most sublime mellifluous patterns with a touch to die for (and an amazingly tender vocal on Senhorinha, written for his now 27-year-old daughter when she was two). Sharing cracks about soccer winners and losers, their musical cup of coffee together was an eavesdropper's dream come true.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Rhapsodies never sounded more, well, rhapsodic than when Italy's **Enrico Pierannunzi** improvised on piano solo at two different recitals at Chapelle du Bon Pasteur. The late show featured updates on Canto Nascosto (hidden song), a celebration of the 200th anniversary of the piano, in a plush acoustic environment. Unlike **Keith Jarrett**, the great Enrico holds back ever so slightly in his attack; his "88-key island" has room for strains of Bach, Chopin and Bill Evans as well as nuance-filled abstractions that tumbled gently from a moonlit sky. His playing was ever-shifting ebb and flow, his sattin touch informing the keys with hopelessly romantic, and probing, caresses.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Toronto-based singer **Tena Palmer**, first known for her work in the ground-breaking quartet Chelsea Bridge a decade ago, is a fearless vocalist who seems to put her life on the line on every tune. That raw intensity was on display through two brilliant sets on the Alcan stage. Palmer led a trio with **John Geggie** on acoustic bass and **Dan Artuso** on guitar and pedal steel as they performed alt-country and jazz-flavoured bluegrass from her CD, North Atlantic Drift.

The spare instrumentation showed off her powerhouse voice and improvisational skills. And the choice of material was just right: David Frishberg's Sweet Kentucky Ham (a quirky song about life on the road), Tom Waits's bitter-sweet The Briar and the Rose, and several of her own tunes about love, loss and restlessness.

Since winning the festival's Grand Prix award with Chelsea Bridge in 1995, Palmer has clearly gained a lot of experience after several years studying and performing in Iceland and Holland. She's got the voice, but she's also got the storyteller's gift.

PETER HADEKEL

A midnight jaunt over to Club Soda found '80s hip-hop icon **Neneh Cherry** unveiling **Cirkus**, her new project with romantic and musical partner **Cameron McVey**. Those hoping to hear her old hit, Buffalo Stance, were disappointed, though she did do her mid-'90s AIDS-awareness anthem, 7 Seconds. The rest of the set was devoted to Cirkus's dark soul-trip-hop sound. Major complaint: Cherry unleashed her still-stylin' rhymes only in spurts, leaving space for McVey's Horace Andy-esque vocals. For this project to work, she should take charge.

T'CHA DUNLEVY

"I feel like I never left," said veteran New York jazz writer and radio host **Michael Bourne** at Club Soda to see Neneh Cherry. "When I come here each year (for the last 15), it's as if it was just yesterday. I've been to many festivals, but this is the only one that gives me that feeling." Bourne, who broadcast his Afternoon Jazz show (for WBGO in Newark, N.J.) from Place des Arts three days this week, loves the classics but sees the future, too. "It's not your father's Bill Evans Trio anymore. When I saw **Plaster** here (the Montreal trio at Club Soda Friday), I was surprised – it was like the Basie band but with electronics. And two singers I love, **Susie Arioli** (who guested on his show) and **Terez Montcalm**, are doing things you just don't hear in the U.S."

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Montreal saxophonist **Joel Miller** jumped out of his comfort zone, inviting McGill's **Effusion** choir to join his **Mandala** group on stage at the Gesù. Mandala opened with some impressively groovy and melodic tunes before the 20-plus-member Effusion came out for some adventurous genre-hopping. Dabbling in choral ambience, gospel, soul, hip-hop, and tossing in a cover of the Police's Synchronicity, the two groups played off each other with inspired results.

T'CHA DUNLEVY

Malian duo **Amadou et Mariam** got a late start at Metropolis, allowing for a furtive excursion to the Beli Groove stage, where **Balkan Beat Box** was kicking up a horn-enhanced jam of hip-hop, electro and jumpin' Gypsy folk. Brazilian singer **Sea Jorge** was spotted in the crowd. Back to Metropolis, where the love-in was in full swing. Amadou et Mariam had scored at last year's Francofolies. They did it again, their world-funk-pop-blues hybrid proving a perfect formula for jazz festival fun.

T'CHA DUNLEVY

"My parents are French, but I have an Italian name – can you imagine how good it feels?" asked **Philippe Rezzonico**, chief music writer for the Journal de Montréal, after France locked up a spot against Italy in Sunday's World Cup final. His father's lineage goes back four generations to Swiss-Italy, his mother is from eastern France. "I'm just going to relax, and kind of root for both teams."

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

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